

# THE BLESSED

# KING

Adapted by Ellen Florian  
from the Greek myth

## Characters

(main parts in boldface)

## Narrators 1, 2

**Zeus**, king of all the gods

**Apollo**, god of light and music

**Admetus**, "the blessed king"

**Alcestis**, Admetus' wife

## The Fates:

**Clotho**, spinner of the thread of life

**Atropos**, the one who cuts off the

thread of a person's life

**Lachesis**, measurer of the thread

of life

**Subjects 1, 2, 3**; Woman; Man;

Peasant; Warrior

**Alcmena**, Admetus' mother

**Pheres**, Admetus' father

Servant

**Heracles**, ancient Greek hero

## INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of time, humans have attempted to explain the workings of the world around them: how the sun rises and sets, why people die, why the seasons change. Today, we have all sorts of scientific and religious explanations for why things happen. In ancient times, however, many cultures tried to explain and understand the world through mythology.

The ancient Greeks believed in the existence of many gods, who lived together on Mount Olympus. Each god was responsible for a separate realm. Zeus, for instance, ruled the skies; Poseidon controlled the seas, and Hades presided in

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the Underworld. Aphrodite was the goddess of love and beauty, and Athena's realm was wisdom, war, and weaving. The Greeks prayed to particular gods depending on the types of problems they faced.

Except for their immortality, Greek gods acted and looked much like humans: They were imperfect, given to jealousy, disloyalty, and murderous rage. In addition to gods, Greek mythology contained demigods, people of super-human abilities who weren't quite at the level of gods. Among those denizens of Olympus were Heracles and the three Fates.

The play that follows is based on a myth that explains the characteristics of certain gods and the nature of a human's fate and was told to teach mortals an important lesson about life.

## PROLOGUE

**Narrator 1:** Apollo is the god of all things virtuous: light and truth, poetry and music, healing and medicine. He also shepherds the sun across the sky.

**Narrator 2:** A grand and handsome god, he charges forth from the east each morning, the mighty sun in tow, and later puts it gently and gloriously to bed in the west. "He is a fine one, that Apollo," gods and mortals say.

**Narr 1:** So it is a surprise to the gods on Olympus when Apollo commits a grievous crime: He kills one of the Cyclops, the one-eyed giant who helped forge Zeus' thunderbolts. Zeus calls Apollo before the throne.

**Zeus:** Explain yourself.

**Apollo:** You killed my son with one of those thunderbolts.

**Zeus:** But the Cyclops was innocent. A mere craftsman.

**Apollo:** My son deserved to be avenged. If I could punish you, I would. But you

are not subject to my punishment.

**Zeus:** Your son was supposed to heal the sick. Instead he brought the dead back to life. He robbed souls from the Underworld!

**Apollo:** Is it so bad to save a few souls?

**Zeus:** Allowing mortals to escape death is dangerous. Without death, they would be gods like us! I had no choice.

**Apollo:** But—

**Zeus:** And I have no choice but to punish you for your hasty and stupid act. For one year, you will live as a servant to King Admetus of Thessaly.

**Apollo:** Me? A servant?

**Zeus:** You will do whatever he asks of you: scrub floors, fetch water, pick fruit.

**Apollo:** But I'm a god. I'm—

**Zeus:** Go now, before I give further punishment. One more thing: Do not tell him your identity until you have finished your year. If you reveal yourself beforehand, I will make you serve a beggar.

## SCENE 1

**Narr 2:** Apollo spends a year as the shepherd of Admetus' flocks. Admetus is a good king, often visiting Apollo in the fields to share a story or some food.

**Narr 1:** Soon they become friends, and Apollo, instead of feeling punished, feels rewarded. To repay the king's kindness, Apollo multiplies his flocks until Admetus becomes the richest king in Greece.

**Narr 2:** The year passes quickly, and soon it is time for Apollo to return to his duties as a god. On his last day of service, he puts the flocks to pasture and walks to the palace to take leave.

**Admetus:** You are the finest of shepherds and the best of friends. Please stay.

**Apollo:** I cannot. But before I go, you should know that you have not be-

frinded a mere shepherd, but a god.

**Narr 1:** His year of servitude finished, the humble, shabby shepherd suddenly becomes the gleaming god Apollo.

**Admetus:** *(falling to his knees)* I am unworthy to be your master. Forgive me, and let me serve you.

**Apollo:** I am at your service. Tell me something I can do for you.

**Admetus:** But you have already—

**Apollo:** Come, there must be something more.

**Admetus:** Well, there is a princess.

**Apollo:** *(amused)* Yes?

**Admetus:** She is Alcestis, and she is the loveliest woman ever.

**Apollo:** Go on.

**Admetus:** She has an angelic face, a quick mind, a happy nature, and a heart bigger than Olympus. I love her, and I believe she returns my love.

**Apollo:** But?

**Admetus:** But her father has given her suitors an impossible task. Only the man who can yoke both a lion and a wild boar to a single chariot can win her as his wife.

**Apollo:** I'm surprised your friend Heracles hasn't helped you. He is the son of Zeus and the strongest of mortals.

**Admetus:** I would ask him, but I've not seen him in ages.

**Apollo:** Ah, yes. He's busy with the 12 labors. It will be years before you see him again. No matter. It is a small task for me.

**Admetus:** But an impossible one for me.

**Apollo:** Consider it done. You will marry tomorrow.

**Narr 2:** Apollo is true to his word. The next day, a beaming Admetus brings a radiant Alcestis home to Thessaly and makes her queen.

## SCENE 2

**Narr 1:** A few years pass, and Admetus becomes even wealthier and happier. Not only does he have the finest kingdom and the most intelligent and devoted queen of any king, but he also has two adorable children who fill the palace with laughter.

**Narr 2:** Admetus' smiling face and kind gestures are a common sight around the kingdom, and his subjects nickname him "the blessed king" because nothing sad ever touches his life.

**Admetus:** Alcestis, why don't we take some meat and fruit to the villagers today?

**Alcestis:** You took sacks of grain to them last week. They will think you are showing off, darling.

**Admetus:** I'm only trying to be generous, dear. Come now.

**Narr 1:** But nobody's good fortune lasts forever, not even a king's. The Fates, who live deep inside Olympus, see to that.

**Narr 2:** Clotho is the Fate who spins the thread of human life. Lachesis measures the thread and decides what kind of life a person will lead. Atropos uses the dreaded shears of death to cut the thread.

**Clotho:** How much longer must I spin Admetus' thread? Bring those shears, Atropos, and let's be done with it. My hands ache.

**Atropos:** You just spin. I'll decide when to end his life.

**Lachesis:** What man has ever been so blessed? Riches, good looks, intelligence, a perfect family: I don't believe he has ever even had a sniffle. I should have been harder on him.

**Clotho:** He is good, though. He is

famous for his kindness  
**Lachesis:** It is easy to be kind when life has been kind to you To be otherwise would be inexcusable  
**Atropos:** True, he has had his share of good fortune. Time for other people to have a turn. Now, where did I put my shears?

**Narr 1:** Having heard the echoes of their conversation, Apollo leaves the mountaintop and makes his way inside Olympus to intervene He appears just as Atropos finds her shears  
**Apollo:** Wait! Stop! Please put those down

**Atropos:** You may be more powerful on top of Olympus, but you hold no sway down here. Go!

**Apollo:** I don't presume to have more power than you who can take life. Some say you are more powerful than Zeus

**Atropos:** (*interested*) Is that so? Tell me, why do you have such an interest in Admetus?

**Apollo:** He was good to me after I was punished for something that was not completely my fault. I am his protector If you could spare him, I will forever be grateful.

**Lachesis:** Once the decision is made, we cannot go back

**Clotho:** No, but there might be something...

**Apollo:** (*desperate*) Please, anything!

**Atropos:** I'll do this for your friend: If he can find someone to die willingly in his stead, we will spare him He has one year

**Apollo:** I'll tell him at once. He will find someone by tomorrow, I'm sure. Thank you very much.

**Atropos:** (*to herself*) By tomorrow? Not even the blessed king will have an easy time of this.



## SCENE 3

**Narr 2:** Apollo goes to Thessaly and tells Admetus about his encounter with the Fates.

**Admetus:** You are a good defender. Tell me, what have I done to offend them?

**Apollo:** You have been too happy. They say sadness must have its turn.

**Alcestis:** How did you turn them from their course?

**Apollo:** I pleaded like a mortal. They agreed on one condition.

**Admetus:** What is it?

**Apollo:** Before the year is out, you must find somebody to die willingly in your place. If you cannot, then you must die.

**Admetus:** I have warriors who would lay down their lives for me, and servants more loyal than dogs. A year, in fact, is much too long.

**Apollo:** Still, you should start your search immediately. Then you won't have to trouble your mind further.

**Admetus:** My mind is already at peace  
**Alcestis:** My mind won't rest until we have this matter resolved. Tomorrow, we will relay the news throughout the kingdom and pray for good fortune to bless us once again



## SCENE 4

**Narr 1:** In the morning, Alcestis sends heralds throughout the land to proclaim the predicament of the king and to ask that someone step forward to take his place.

**Subject 1:** Such misfortune! And to such a good king.

**Subject 2:** He was just here with his little ones, giving bread to the people and sweet cakes to our children. It makes my heart break.

**Subject 3:** What of his wife and children? There is no better man than King Admetus. Somebody ought to save him.

**Subject 1:** Yes, somebody ought to, but it won't be me. I have my own small ones to look after.

**Subject 2:** My children have lost their father. They need me.

**Subject 3:** I don't have children, but I like my life too much to lose it—even for the king.

## SCENE 5

**Narr 2:** A month goes by. Then two months. Nobody offers to die for the king. Five months pass. Then ten months are gone. Still, nobody. All the

while, Alcestis paces the castle and sends forth more heralds

**Narr 1:** Admetus no longer smiles as he travels through his kingdom. No longer does he take food to his subjects. And nobody calls him "the blessed king" any longer.

**Narr 2:** Now he rides through the streets with his head down. He can hear his subjects whisper: "There goes the cursed king."

**Narr 1:** Two months before his year is up, Admetus sets out to confront people and ask the unthinkable. They avert their eyes when he approaches. One day, on a trip to a village, he stops by a flower-seller's cart.

**Admetus:** Good day, madam—

**Woman:** Would you be wanting some flowers, Your Highness?

**Admetus:** Well, no, I—

**Woman:** (*packing up her wares*) I have to be getting home.

**Narr 2:** Next, he approaches an old man hobbling along the road.

**Admetus:** Sir, have you heard about my problem?

**Man:** Eh?

**Admetus:** (*louder*) I have this problem

I was hoping you might help me with  
**Man:** (*nodding*) Ah, I know about that problem

**Admetus:** Well, considering that you're an old man and all, and somewhat sickly from the looks of you, would you be willing to, uh, take my place in the Underworld?

**Man:** I will not take your place. I must finish out my own life.

**Admetus:** You are old and wretched. What sort of life can you possibly have compared to mine?

**Man:** Maybe I do look wretched. And maybe I don't have the fine life of a king. But I can still see the sunset and hear my grandchildren laughing and savor the taste of fresh fruit and bread. That alone is reason enough to put off death.

**Narr 1:** Over and over, Admetus meets with similar answers. The more he is turned away, the more bitter he becomes.

**Narr 2:** When one man says no even before the dreaded question is uttered, Admetus hurls harsh words upon his subjects.

**Admetus:** You stupid, contemptible people! After all I have done for you, not one of you pitiable peasants will give up your low and worthless lives for someone who has reason to live!

**Peasant:** Listen to him! I'm glad I didn't offer.

**Admetus:** Now you call me "the cursed king"? I curse the day I ever showed you a kindness!

**Peasant:** He was kind only because it was convenient.

**Admetus:** You vile vermin, I should have taxed you into poverty and whipped you into meekness. Then you would all beg for the Underworld over the hell of Thessaly.

## SCENE 6

**Narr 1:** Admetus retreats to his palace to look for someone among the people he knows. First, he asks his warriors.

**Admetus:** Men, when I have called on you to take up arms in defense of our homeland, you have bravely answered that call, have you not?

**Warrior:** That we did, my king.

**Admetus:** And sometimes, in protecting the kingdom, some of our fine comrades have given their lives, have they not?

**Warrior:** That they did, Your Highness.

**Admetus:** Now we are faced with an enemy that is conspiring to take you king from this happy and prosperous land, an enemy that can be vanquished only by a soldier who is braver than the bravest. Who is that man?

**Warrior:** Is the enemy you are speaking of the Fates, your Highness?

**Admetus:** Yes.

**Warrior:** We have been faithful in defending the kingdom against intruders, and we will always be loyal to that cause.

**Admetus:** And what of *this* cause?

**Warrior:** This battle you speak of is a private one—one that all people must face—peasant, warrior, or king. One day I will face my death. So must you, with the bravery and dignity that befits your station.

**Admetus:** You are not warriors. You are cowards! May you all suffer cruel and painful deaths!

**Narr 2:** Admetus asks his palace servants. Their reaction is the same as that of the warriors: He asks the men and women who attend him. They also decline to die for him.

**Narr 1:** With only two days left before the year is out, Admetus resorts to the

last people on his list: his parents. First, he goes to his mother.

**Admetus:** Mother, I don't want to ask you this.

**Alcmena:** Then please don't. It will kill me to hear it.

**Admetus:** Mother, please. I'm your only child. Your duty is to me. All you have is a few years of your hobbled life. Certainly that is not worth the life of your young, healthy son.

**Alcmena:** How dare you try to deprive me of my only years of peace! I who bore you and devoted every moment to you.

**Admetus:** Mother, I'm only—

**Alcmena:** My duty to you is done. It is now your duty to care for me.

**Admetus:** If I am alive on the day you die, I will not mourn you.

**Alcmena:** Nothing can be as painful as raising a son who does not honor his mother. Be gone!

**Narr 2:** Admetus goes to his father.

**Pheres:** I know why you are here. My answer is no.

**Admetus:** It is unnatural for parents to bury their children, Father. It should be the other way. You can put this right.

**Pheres:** I have done everything for you. I even gave you my throne while I am still alive. What other king has done so much for his son?

**Admetus:** None, Father. But what good is a throne if I die?

**Pheres:** It sickens me to think that you repay me this way. Leave me. I can't bear to look at you.

**Narr 1:** Just hours before he must die, Admetus goes to his room. In his disappointment and anger, he takes no leave of anyone, not even his wife or children, and locks his door against them.

**Narr 2:** He lies down, and gradually, his life slips away. As his eyes start to close forever, he feels a sudden rush of

good health and springs up from the bed, robust and alive. He opens his door and runs through the halls shouting gleefully.

**Admetus:** Look, everyone! I'm alive! I've cheated death!

**Narr 1:** Strangely, though, nobody rejoices to see him, and in another room, he can hear his children crying. He enters and sees them beside his wife's lifeless body.

**Admetus:** (*crying*) Dear Alcestis! Oh, what have you done?

**Servant:** When you went to your room to die, she offered herself to the Fates in exchange for your life.

**Admetus:** Why didn't you stop her?

**Servant:** I tried to. But she wouldn't listen, Your Highness.

**Admetus:** (*kneeling beside his wife*) So this is my reward for selfishness and cowardice. I truly am the most cursed of kings. And I was ever unworthy to call you my wife. Come, children. I must tell the people that their queen is dead.

## SCENE 7

**Narr 2:** The entire kingdom goes into mourning for the queen. The mood of the palace is grim and sad.

**Narr 1:** Admetus doesn't leave his room for days, not even to eat. When he finally emerges after a week, his face is pale and drawn, his eyes cold and blank. His skin hangs loosely from his bones.

**Narr 2:** Soon after, as the king is making preparations for the queen's burial, he hears a loud knock at the palace door. A servant answers it.

**Heracles:** (*loudly*) Show me to the king, Admetus, where are you?

**Narr 1:** Admetus is in no mood to entertain a guest, but knowing he has already been unforgivably selfish, he

decides to put aside his grief and show his old friend the finest hospitality he has to offer

**Admetus:** (*smiling*) Welcome, Heracles. It's good to see you after so many years

**Heracles:** (*slapping Admetus on the back*) I've been busy doing the nearly impossible, old friend

**Admetus:** Sit please, and have some wine. What is your news?

**Heracles:** You've heard about the nine-headed Hydra? Great Zeus, that was a hard one to kill!

**Admetus:** Yes, and now you are a hero as great as Theseus

**Heracles:** Better than Theseus, my friend

**Admetus:** Much better. I should have been more generous in my praise

**Heracles:** I've just fetched the savage bull from the island of Crete. Soon, I'll be off to get the man-eating mares in Thrace

**Admetus:** And after that?

**Heracles:** Only four more labors to go, one of which takes me to the Underworld

**Admetus:** I can imagine it will be a relief when you're done

**Heracles:** It will be. Admetus, you're not looking your best, old friend. And things look awfully glum around here.

**Admetus:** A woman in the palace died this week

**Heracles:** I'm sorry to hear that

**Admetus:** But that's no reason why you can't enjoy yourself. My palace is your home

**Heracles:** I look forward to my stay. Let's drink to my visit!

**Admetus:** Perhaps tomorrow. I must make funeral arrangements now. My servants will assist you



**Narr 2:** Heracles sits down and orders the servants to bring him food, wine, and musicians to entertain him

**Heracles:** Louder! Faster! What is this somber music? Let's have a happier tune!

**Narr 1:** The musicians pick up the pace. Heracles gorges himself, spilling food and drink.

**Heracles:** Bring me more food! I'll starve if you move any slower! More wine! Do you want me to die of thirst?

**Narr 2:** The servants bring sides of meat and flasks of wine

**Heracles:** Can't you be faster? Can't you at least smile when you serve me?

**Servant:** Sir, we are in a house of mourning

**Heracles:** Such deep mourning for a woman who merely worked here?

**Servant:** We are in mourning for the queen

**Heracles:** (*shocked*) Alcestis has died? Why didn't the king say so?

**Servant:** He didn't want to dampen your enthusiasm

**Heracles:** What a stupid, loud oaf I've been! When did she die?

**Servant:** A week ago today

**Heracles:** It's not too late then. Tell Admetus I will return shortly.

**Narr 1:** Heracles seeks out a rift in the earth beside a deep lake and forces his way inside, then finds his way to the Underworld

**Narr 2:** When he arrives, he sees Alcestis climbing into a boat that will ferry her across the River Styx to the land of the dead.

**Narr 1:** He calls to her, and she moves toward him. But Death, a dark and shapeless monster, steps between them.

**Narr 2:** Heracles, the doer of impossible feats, achieves what nobody has ever done or will ever do again. He wrestles Death for the body and soul of a mortal. And he wins

**Narr 1:** Heracles carries Alcestis, weak and pale, from the Underworld and back to the palace in Thessaly. In the early hours of the morning, he pounds on the palace door.

**Heracles:** Open up! I've someone here to see the king!

**Narr 2:** Annoyed by Heracles' harsh manners, Admetus nonetheless manages to put on a pleasant face to greet his ill-bred guest. He opens the door

and sees Heracles holding somebody wrapped in a black cloak

**Admetus:** I did not realize you had gone out. Whom have you brought?

**Narr 1:** Heracles pulls the cloak back from Alcestis' face.

**Admetus:** (*gasping*) Alcestis?

What? How... Is this a trick?

**Alcestis:** I am the same Alcestis who died. But I am alive now. Heracles brought me back to you

**Admetus:** But the Fates! They cannot be cheated

**Heracles:** They weren't cheated. She died. But I won her back in a fair fight with Death.

**Narr 2:** Admetus touches her cheek tentatively, as if Alcestis might disappear. He touches her hair, her face, her shoulders, and her arms and then embraces her tightly.

**Admetus:** (*crying*) You're back. You're really here with me?

**Alcestis:** (*kissing him*) I'm here. Really and truly, I am here.

**Admetus:** (*to Heracles*) Thank you, friend. Thank you for giving me my wife and for giving my children their mother. I am the most blessed of kings